

(U) Workplace Dilemma? Ask Zelda! -- Today's Situation: Dealing With a 'Downer'

FROM: 'Zelda,' Dispenser of Advice on SIGINT Management Issues

Run Date: 10/01/2010

(U) Editor's note: The text of this article is UNCLASSIFIED in its entirety.



Dear Zelda,

I have a co-worker who is a non-stop complainer. He is a total downer for everyone that he has contact with. His kvetching begins first thing in the morning with: "what's so good about this morning, blah blah blah" and thankfully ends when he goes home for the day. Most of us deal with him by just **avoiding** him. However, lately management has been sending him along with us on trips downtown, to conferences, seminars, etc. Do you have any advice as to how we can get him to shut up and stop ruining everybody

else's mood, especially when we're on our way to important meetings downtown? Also, any tips on bringing this to management's attention **tactfully** to advise them that he is **not** the best person to represent our mission when we interact with our counterparts downtown?

Signed,

Pollyanna

Dear Polly,

I know just how you feel. I have a very sensitive negativity detector myself, and the type of person you describe can be very draining - not to mention irritating. Let me share a few tips I have discovered over the years to deal with this personality type, and then I will address how to approach management on the subject.

Be a Clown

Sometimes a good-natured teasing will do the trick. Prepare a funny quip about getting up on the wrong side of the bed to dispel the gloomy attitude. Often downers don't realize how they're coming across to others and all it takes is someone to point it out.

Because negative people tend to generalize, it can occasionally help to ask a lot of questions and get them to be specific; even combining this with humor. For example, "You say *nothing* ever works right? Are you *sure*? Because this car seems to be running OK... And my watch is working fine...and your mouth seems to be working reeeeeeally well.... What exactly *isn't* working?"

The Straightforward Approach

Nicely tell your kvetching colleague that his constant whining is wearing you down, and ask him to stop. You can mention that you are trying to stay in a positive frame of mind in preparation for the meeting you're attending, and to please refrain from complaining around you. (Note: Although this will occasionally work, I have found it is not usually the most effective method for dealing with a chronic grumbler.)

Embrace The Dark Side (Really, I'm serious!)

If you can, find some value in his negativity. I have noticed that, very often, these Donny Downers don't think of themselves as being negative; they believe they are being "realistic." When they think no one is paying attention to their warnings of impending doom, they keep repeating them - louder and louder - until they get through. You can short circuit this by acknowledging what they're saying. For example, "That's a good point, Donny. Thanks for making us aware of that." Sometimes they just need validation. The trick here is to be genuine. Really pay attention and ask clarifying questions. Who knows? After being shunned by his office mates for so long, the attention may even shock him into silence!

The only thing to watch out for with this approach is that, encouraged by your interest, he doesn't go on and on. Listen for a while and then cut him short, if necessary. Don't let him dwell or get stuck in negativity mode. You might add, "And how do you propose we get around that obstacle?" By forcing him to come up with something positive every time he expresses a negative, he may skip right to the solution in the future - or at least stop carrying on about the all problems.

Set Some Rules

If you can't avoid or ignore this person because you are trapped in a car with him, steer clear of subjects that set him off. Likewise, warn your co-workers about "off-limits" topics that could potentially unleash a rant from Donny. Try to steer the conversation toward subjects that he likes (golf? dogs?). You and your co-workers might also want to agree on rules for riding together to these seminars and meetings. Perhaps certain topics are taboo (politics? the promotion system?) if he tends to complain about one thing in particular; or charge a "fine" for every negative comment (as some people do for swearing in the office); or set a time limit on how much each person can talk, if he tends to monopolize the conversation. If all that doesn't solve the problem, I hear duct tape works really well! [wink]

As for bringing it to management's attention tactfully, I find it hard to believe that your management doesn't already know he is like this. You say that they have been sending him along on trips downtown - they probably just want him and his downer 'tude out of the office! But if you really think they're unaware, speak to your supervisor about it. Don't come across as complaining about his personality, but describe his behavior, citing specific examples, and express your concern over the impact you think it is having on interactions with partner or customer organizations.

For you managers out there who supervise a "Donny," it is important for you to proactively address the issue - even if no one in the office has come to complain about him. This personality type -- and I mean a chronic complainer, not someone who's having an occasional bad day -- is toxic to the workplace. He's bad for morale and productivity...but that's a topic for a whole 'nuther column.

So, Polly, I hope that, by using a combination of the above techniques plus some timely management intervention, you will be able to enjoy pleasant trips to conferences, seminars, and meetings with your formerly gloomy co-worker and not have to resort to blasting ELO's "Don't Bring Me Down" from the tape deck of your government vehicle for the entire trip!

Edda

P.S. I'd like to take this opportunity to wish a Happy Boss' Day (16 October) to all you supervisors out there!
